WORLD

Marcos rolls the dice

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The pressure on Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos had been increasing for months. A steady procession of high-level U.S. officials travelled to Manila with CIA projections of impending disaster for the Marcos regime. They told the 68-year-old president that unless he instituted prompt political and economic reforms, the Philippines would fall to Communist insurgents within three years. Then, last month Senator Paul Laxalt (R-Nev.), one of President Ronald Reagan's most trusted friends in Washington, conveyed the president's own deepening concerns. As a result, when Marcos told ABC TV on Oct. 3 that he intended to hold a presidential election on Jan. 17, U.S. officials expressed relief. "It's positive," Laxalt told Maclean's. But he added, "We need to make sure this is a fair election."

The Marcos announcement brought immediate protests from Filipino opposition parties, which charged that the president intended to rig the election process in his favor. Marcos, they claimed, was violating a constitutional provision that requires the president

to resign from office before running for re-election. In response, Marcos promised to submit his resignation, but it would only be effective after the election. Opposition leader Jovito Salonga, for one, described the plan as "a masterpiece of absurdity." The move is still subject to parliamentary approval, but with two-thirds control of the assembly, Marcos seemed likely to win the concession. Nevertheless, his actions have focused new attention on his controversial record in office. As the president himself conceded last week, emerging from the Malacañang, the presidential palace, for a brief campaign trip, "The issue is Marcos."

After ruling for 20 years, Marcos presides over a nation torn by leftwing guerrilla warfare, a weakening economy and widespread corruption. He exercises broad arbitrary powers, a strategic remnant of nine years of martial law, which ended in 1981. Critics also accuse him of amassing vast fortunes for his family and friends, some of whom have begun investing their assets abroad. Although informed sources say that Marcos is suffering from lupus erythematosus, a degenerative disease of the vital organs, he shows no interest in stepping down or even naming a successor.

At the same time, poorly trained and undisciplined government troops

have gained notoriety by abusing power and engaging in political conspiracy. Once respected for their professionalism, the armed forces have been demoralized by the trial of their chief of staff, Gen. Fabian Ver. The close associate of Marcos is standing trial in Manila, along with 25 other defendants, on charges of complicity in the murder of opposition leader Benigno Aquino in 1983. Despite American requests that Marcos distance himself from Ver, the president has pledged to reinstate him if he is acquitted when the trial ends next month. Whatever the verdict, many Filipinos now say that Aquino, a potential successor to Marcos, was assassinated on military orders.

The erosion of the army's reputation has encouraged thousands of Filipino peasants and small businessmen to support the guerrillas. The Communist New People's Army (NPA), whose membership is estimated to be 16,500, has also benefited from alienation among the nation's impoverished rural population. Since 1983, NPA troops have spread throughout the Philippine archipelago and now control 53 of the nation's 73 provinces.

Many observers cite Aquino's murder as the source of an economic, as well as political, crisis of confidence. Since that time, investors have exported hundreds of millions of dollars, put-

ting further pressure on an economy already hurt by falling prices for its principal commodities—sugar and coconuts. The nation's gross national product is expected to slide by at least five per cent this year. Moreover, opposition politicians accuse Marcos of liberally distributing government funds to gain friends and political supporters. One source inside the Malacañang acknowledged last week that Marcos will spend up to $500 million for special projects during the campaign. Said the palace official: "An election will set the economy back for years."

Marcos's well-financed political machine provides a major challenge to the opposition parties. As one opposition member of the national assembly candidly explained: "To win an election in the Philippines you have to have guns, goons and gold. We have the goons, but we are low on ammunition and money." Even more serious, disputing opposition factions have spent two years trying unsuccessfully to find a single candidate around whom to unite. The most likely choice: Aquino's widow, Corazon, 52. Last week, opposition officials tried to convince the other most prominent candidate, Salvador (Doy) Laurel, 56, to serve as Corazon's vice-presidential running mate. Although the veteran politician leads the largest block of opposition parties, the United Nationalist Democratic Organization, many Filipinos distrust him; Laurel backed Marcos until 1980, finally breaking with the president over a local electoral dispute. Corazon Aquino is a political novice, but supporters say she is untouched by scandal and commands strong support among the nation's poor.

Indeed, Marcos may have little to lose by accepting Western demands for fair elections. But opposition leader Salonga declared, "He is not about to cut his own throat just to please Washington." Reagan administration spokesmen say they fear that if the guerrillas succeed in toppling Marcos, they will order the Pentagon to vacate the Clark Air Force and Subic Bay naval bases in the Philippines, the largest and most critical U.S.

military installations outside the United States. A U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee report released last week said that rigged elections “could ignite an explosion of public resentment” and help rally support for the Communist insurgents. And candidate Laurel said that a fraudulent vote will so polarize the nation’s politics that “the moderate opposition would become irrelevant.” Added Laurel: “It would be the last election in the Philippines.”

-JARED MITCHELL with LIN NEUMANN in Manila and WILLIAM LOWTHER in Washington

LIN NEUMANN

WILLIAM LOWTHER